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The challenge of 'Working Together', 2018

Complexity, change and the development of new leadership models

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Leaders of the English child welfare system are steeped in the experience of change – new legislation, practice developments and reformed inspection regimes mean that the child welfare system experiences an on-going process of transformation, reform and innovation. Amongst recent challenges is that contained within the Children and Social Work Act, 2017, and the seemingly straightforward phrase 'the abolition of Local Safeguarding Children Boards'. The implications of this brief formulation are elaborated upon in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' (WTSC).¹ This article outlines and analyses the leadership challenges embedded in these changes.

The road to reform

In 2016, the government asked Alan Wood, a former Director of Children's Services, to undertake a review of the role of Local Safeguarding Children Boards. Wood's terms of references were:

"To lead a fundamental review of the role and functions of Local Safeguarding Children Boards

(LSCBs) within the context of local strategic multi-agency working."²

The argument for change seemed to be based in a political perception – in my view a mistaken perception – that the safeguarding system is 'failing'. This view was expressed by Michael Gove and Edward Timpson when they were the Ministers responsible for the system (see below for a

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discussion of this). The Ministers had concerns about the quality of some Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) and the judgements made about LSCBs in Ofsted inspections.

In relation to LSCBs, the Wood review concluded:

"Overall, the responses I have received make clear to me that the case for fundamental reform is based on a widely held view that LSCBs, for a variety of reasons, are not sufficiently effective. The limitations of LSCBs in delivering their key objectives have been fully exposed in this review and by the work of Ofsted. There needs to be a much higher degree of confidence that the strategic multi-agency arrangements we make to protect children are fit-for-purpose, consistently reliable and able to ensure children are being protected effectively."²

The Wood Report was published in May 2016, alongside the Government response, which accepted all his proposals for change. The Government response stated that it aimed to achieve the following for the child protection system:

- Excellent practice is the norm
- Partner agencies hold one other to account effectively
- There is early identification of 'new' safeguarding issues
- Learning is promoted and embedded
- Information is shared effectively
- The public can feel confident that children are protected from harm.

The first of these points was omitted during the consultation phase on WTSC, perhaps in a dawning realisation that the definition of excellence is being above the norm, thus making this formulation grammatically and practically impossible. Nevertheless the formulation does expose the high expectations of government, even in a period of austerity. The other aims are uncontroversial, but the methods chosen for achieving them raise some major leadership challenges.

In summary, the Wood Report suggested that LSCBs should be abolished and replaced by new flexible local arrangements led by three safeguarding partners: the chief officers of the local authority, the police, and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), or their delegated senior officers. Those partners will have a duty to make arrangements to

work together, with any relevant agencies, for the purpose of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in their area. There are other reforms in relation to Child Death Overview Panels and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, which are not the focus of this article.

Following the acceptance of the Wood Report, the timetable for the subsequent reform process is as follows:

- The Wood Report findings were embedded in the Children and Social Work Act, 2017
- 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' was published in July 2018
- The National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel became fully operational from 29th June, 2018, under the leadership of Edward Timpson
- New safeguarding arrangements for each locality are to be published and submitted to Government by 29th June, 2019 at the latest
- New safeguarding arrangements are to be implemented by 29th September, 2019 at the latest.

By October, 2019 every local authority area in England will have a new child safeguarding architecture in place. More than this is very difficult to state with any authority: as WTSC¹ is, in many ways, de-regulatory in its effect and is not as prescriptive as was the case with the previous iteration of WTSC.⁴ It is for the 'three partners' in each of the relevant local authority areas to propose how they wish to implement the new arrangements in their local area. In theory then, there could be more than 150 local plans that will all be different – although, as authorities are allowed to merge for these purposes, the number may be fewer than this.

However, by October 2019, each area will have its own Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (these are starting to be known as MASAs). The process must be overseen by someone who will provide 'independent scrutiny' – this has evolved from the previous role of the 'independent chair' of a LSCB. The 'three partners' must publish a twelve-monthly report, which the independent person must scrutinise.

The three partners must identify the 'relevant agencies' they wish to work with, in safeguarding children and young people. Again, the exact list

will vary from locality to locality, but will include a wide range of organisations working with children and young people. Such organisations are listed in Chapter Two of WTSC – the list includes prison, probation, early years and childcare, and the third sector amongst many others. The ‘relevant agencies’ in each area will be identified by the ‘three partners’ and will outline how they will work together in the published arrangements.

Having explored the expectations of WTSC the article now moves on to analyse the leadership challenges.

Understanding the leadership challenge

There are two (of the many possible) leadership models which may be helpful in understanding the challenge presented by WTSC, theories of distributed leadership and communities of practice. Both seem to be applicable to building the new model.

Distributed leadership, as the title suggests, argues that leadership should not be deposited with one ‘charismatic’ or ‘heroic’ leader, and should be distributed to encourage increased participation, engagement and playing to strengths of different leaders.⁵ The ‘three partners’ model of WTSC is consistent with this model: however, how this will work in practice is a complex challenge. Historically, local authorities have dominated safeguarding arrangements, for example often housing the ‘independent’ LSCB staff. Further, Wood was naïve to imagine that the CCG could somehow represent the complex NHS structures. And some commentators may be concerned that the status of the police as a leading partner shifts child protection more towards law enforcement and away from the social support aspects. A distributed model is embedded in WTSC, but is complex to implement.

Another possibly applicable model is that proposed by Etienne Wenger⁶ and known as ‘communities of practice’ (CoP). This model works towards building a shared organisational culture through developing a joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire. In this context the joint enterprise would be to promote the welfare and safety of children in a given area. Mutual engagement, for Wenger, means that all participants

are engaged as active partners. A shared repertoire is harder to operationalise but, for example, includes a common culture, value base and language.

This article has thus far outlined the main changes outlined in WTSC (2018) in relation to the organisational and leadership challenges. The leadership challenges are now explored.

The dangers of developing a nationally diverse system are apparent:

- Cross-authority communication will be more difficult – now it takes place between LSCB chair to LSCB chair, or LSCB manager to LSCB manager. It will be complex to find out who to communicate with in the new architecture
- Professional pre-qualifying training will become more difficult. Pre-WTSC 2018 a trainer/lecturer to inform all students that the LSCB would provide information on policy, procedures and training for example. Post-WTSC 2018 there will be no shared organisational structure.

Having presented the background and content of WTSC (2018), it is important to address the following four questions:

- a. Where does leadership reside?
- b. How can ‘independent scrutiny’ be developed?
- c. What are the risks contained within the new system?
- d. How can inclusive Communities of Practice be developed?

Where does leadership reside?

WTSC has established a complex leadership challenge. It has embedded a distributed leadership model – within a loose, ‘de-regulated’ context. The three leaders are asked to devise a model that is embedded in their locality and local challenges, whilst being compliant with WTSC. It is difficult, however, to see how leadership will be distributed. Leadership could be distributed between the three partners on a

functional basis; the clear problem with this is a lack of a holistic approach and the dangers of fragmentation. It may be the case that leadership will default to one dominant or charismatic figure – but that of course undermines the suggested model in WTSC. It is also possible that the independent scrutiny could take a leadership role with a distributed model sitting under this leadership – however, this would be reminiscent of a LSCB.



There are two (of the many possible) leadership models which may be helpful in understanding the challenge presented by WTSC, theories of distributed leadership and communities of practice.



How can ‘independent scrutiny’ be developed?

Child welfare system leaders are used to scrutiny – most often provided by Ofsted and other inspectorial regimes. The WTSC model is, however, more complex and more fluid. The independent scrutineer role is loosely defined in WTSC. At one end of the continuum, the model of the Independent Chair could continue with the independent person convening, chairing, challenging and ‘trouble-shooting’. At the other continuum, the expectations of WTSC may be met if independent function is, for example, a one-week scrutiny of the safeguarding system undertaken as a peer challenge or evaluation, perhaps involving young people.

What are the risks contained within the new system?

The risks of the new system are clear.

The primary one is the development of a national patchwork of provision. One issue that Wood did not recognise was that the statutory existence of LCSBs facilitated communication between Chairs and Board managers on issues such as SCRs, procedures and peer support. This will be more difficult in the new system, where there may or not be a Board or a Chair, and where scrutiny can take a myriad of forms. Further, the shift from a highly regulated system under WTSC, 2015, to a largely de-regulated system under WTSC, 2018, may lead to systems that are not fit-for-purpose. It is for local leaders to address these risks: WTSC empowers them to deliver an innovative local model that effectively safeguards children and young people in their local area.

How can inclusive communities of practice be developed?

One danger of a distributed leadership model is that leadership resides at once everywhere and nowhere. The three identified chief officers are in highly-demanding posts with wide and diverse responsibilities. Their attention and energy is bound to be engaged in a range of activities, of which

this particular set of reforms is but one. Wenger’s work would suggest that active engagement is essential. One advantage of the CoP model is that it emphasises organisational culture, which allows us to develop inclusive, dynamic partnership models where the culture is more important than the policy and procedures.

Conclusion

This article has explored the leadership challenges contained with WTSC, 2018. It has been argued that many complex leadership challenges arise from the seemingly straightforward phrase ‘the abolition of Local Safeguarding Children Boards’. Theories of distributed leadership and communities of practice have been useful in helping to understand these leadership challenges. How the challenges will work out in future is an open question: it can only be hoped that Alan Wood’s vision of an improved safeguarding system will work out in practice, and that children and young people will be involved as full partners. ■

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